Author's BAZAAR ONLINE
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SCHOOL STARTS

EDITOR'S NOTE

By Dean Rea

Bill Sullivan probably has walked over more of Oregon than any person throughout history while gathering information for the hiking books he writes. As the summer heated up, I thought about the snakes that shake their rattles along my favorite flyfishing streams in Central Oregon.

That led me to invite Bill to write an article about snakes he has encountered while hiking. As any writer knows, a snake incident or a reptilian reference heightens reader interest.

Bill probably would question the headline I wrote for the article that follows, but it's worth sharing. I must confess, however, that when I think of snakes, "it makes me nervous."

I also break out in a heat rash when I read about the summer adventure of photographer/writer Greg McKelvey.

There's comic relief, however, with a monster story by Louise Fusfeld, and a sobering yarn about a pigeon by Lee Kirk. A bird also is involved in a poem written by Sheryl Nelms.

Dave Giffin grows serious in "Waiting for Me," and Clarence Wolfshohl ends this month's *Author's Bazaar* menu with a story about my favorite entrée: chicken-friend steak.

We have added the e-mail addresses of our writers, which offers readers an opportunity to drop them a note.

Readers should note that in the future, you will receive notice of an upcoming published *Author's Bazaar* via our e-mail address: authors.bazaar@gmail.com We mention this so that if you have any security issues with your e-mail account, you might add our address to your e-mail address book. If you have names and e-mail addresses of people to add to the list, send them to authors.bazaar@gmail.com

Oregon's friendly rattlers

By William "Bill" Sullivan

Oregon's snakes are amiable and misunderstood. On average, only one person per decade dies from a snakebite in Oregon, and these people are nearly always young, drunk

males who have cornered a rattlesnake and are poking it with a stick.

When asked why, they say they attacked the snake because they were afraid someone might get hurt. Occasionally a rock climber or hiker is bit when he sticks his hand into a hole. In these cases the snake has mistaken the hand for a mouse.

Nonetheless, Oregon rattlesnakes are not nearly as venomous as Southwest rattlers. So, the bite is no worse than a bad bee sting, unless the person is panicked or allergic. Snakes, and especially rattlesnakes, are extremely helpful in keeping down rodent populations.

Some people fear snakes instinctively, but this is a leftover instinct from an age when early humans lived in Africa among deadly snakes and is now only an irrational fear to be overcome.

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William L. Sullivan is the author of 17 books. His latest guide, the 4th edition of "100 Hikes in NW Oregon," features a dozen new trails in the Portland/Columbia Gorge/Mt. Hood/Mt. St. Helens area. It's available at **www.oregonhiking.com.**

THE HOTTEST DAY OF THE YEAR

WHAT WERE WE THINKING?

By Greg McKelvey

Downstream from Hover Dam within the Lake Mead National Recreation area nine photographers arrive at Willow Beach, Arizona, for a June 28-29 workshop.

It was hot even though we had no official thermometer to check the temperature. Elsewhere in the West, Furnace Creek, Death Valley, California recorded a record temperature at 129.2 degrees. Bullhead City cooked in at 124. Las Vegas at 119, Phoenix the same and even Pine Arizona topped the 100 mark. Some airplanes were grounded due to the heat. The tragic Hot Shot killing fire in the Yarnell Hills started with the heat and extreme monsoon weather it generates.

What were we thinking to plan a trip to the Colorado River on what turned out to be the hottest day of the year?

Earlier in the month, I received an e-mail message from

Bighorn Sheep (Ovis canadensis nelsoni)

Dr. Bruce Taubert, well respected, extensively published wildlife photographer and retired director of wildlife for the Arizona Game and Fish Department. Would I like to join him and several other Arizona Highways volunteers and published photographers, on a test run of a potential Arizona Highways Photo Workshop?

After a bit more than a nano second, I responded, yes, count me in. An hour later, I confirmed there was an additional spot. I convinced my buddy Bill Zadina to sign up. What a unique opportunity to accompany an expert to photograph Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep. Well, Nevada ones too!

Roberta Lites, the executive director Arizona Highways Photo Workshop, coordinated the efforts and made the ba-

sic arrangements. Being a test run, the costs included the boat and provisions. Accommodations and meals for this trip were up to us.

The plan was to meet in Boulder City at 11 a.m. on June 28 and to be on the River by 1 p.m. for an afternoon of shooting through the lens.

Nine experienced photographers were in the group and our leader also captained the boat. Good thing too for he knows the habits of the animals and how to position the boat best for quality photos. Being able to anticipate their movements, maneuver the craft, call out settings and suggestions and give a running lesson on the Bighorn sheep behavior was simply priceless.

The following day we were on the water at 8 a.m. and except for a pit stop we stayed on the boat until a bit after 3 p.m. Given that Bullhead City was 124 degrees on the same river a bit south of us, and given that there was a breeze at times and with the movement of the boat up to 15 knots, the heat rose to blast furnace levels. Some described it as hot; others added colorful words in front of hot.

Bighorn Sheep, and there are said to be about 2,000 of them in this part of the planet, need water. After the winter rains and before the mid-summer monsoons thunderstorms, the only water available to them is the Colorado

River. They need to drink each day or die. A bighorn can endure the heat to survive and is uniquely equipped to shut off some to the blood flows to various areas of its body to maintain a cool head.

Meanwhile, our ability to endure the heat rests on good planning, Froggy Togg neck towels, sunscreen, hats, energy drinks, lots of water, rotating under the canopy for spells of shade and an occasional cold river water douse from a bucket.

During our sojourn, we saw 113 sheep, two Bald Eagles, five Peregrine Falcons, Heron and boatloads of crazier-than-us receptionists and their kids. I do not know if our sample is representative, yet it seems remarkable that we might have seen over 5 percent of the wildlife population

during our short trip.

A week later and we might not have been so fortunate. The monsoon rains started and puddles of water in the mountains might have been easier for them to find.

This is how the Internet describes our photographic prey: A full-grown bighorn averages from 30 to 39 inches tall at the shoulder and about 60 inches long. The males are typically larger than the females. Adult males range in

weight from 160 to 200 pounds. Adult females, also known as ewes, average about 105 pounds. The great curved horns, which may reach a full curl, attain a length of up to 40 inches. The horns grow from the base and stop growing during the breeding season, leaving a growth ring that can be counted to

determine a ram's age. The ewes have smaller horns, seldom exceeding 13 inches. While expert climbers, they are not likely to swim. The populations on the East and West sides of the Colorado River are the same, yet may not interact all that frequently.

From Capitan Bruce we learned more of the details of their behavior, mating rituals, saw first-hand lip curls, sniffing and amorous adults expanding the gene pool.

We also encountered raptors and buzzards. The careful maneuvering of the boat gave us close-up photo opps. Bruce reminded us that the camera needs to be set on rapid fire and the mode for continuous focus.

The typical scene starts with someone spotting a

sheep or bird and calling out where it is located. As we maneuver toward the subject, all cameras are literately focused on the animal.

At some point, close enough no one can resist the first camera fires off a burst of 20 snaps. Soon the boat is a hive of snapping buzzing sounds as each photographer starts, stops, bursts and follows the animal.

The hope, of course, is to capture a nice photo of the animal and as we cruse closer, perhaps, oh please yes, get an once-in-a-lifetime photo of them moving or flying or doing

something unusual.

I have no way to know how many photos other members took, but I took close to 4,000 shots in two days. I even got a bunch I like. Such is the world of wildlife photography. When there is an opportunity, do not waste it! So it was on the cruise ship Bighorn. Quiet times were filled with explicative on how hot it was, occasional water dousing, intense periods of whizzing clicking of nine cameras some at more than 20 frames per second, and finally quiet again as each camera looked up to the eyes of the owner giving a playback of what is now on a digital card.

No wonder that photography is growing exponentially in popularity; modern cameras make it a lot easier to capture the moment.

Several members of the group arrived early and spent an extra night before the hot drive home. Hoover Dam, Bighorn Sheep in Boulder City's Hemmingway Park, and Lake Mead provided additional photo opps.

Being with enjoyable people, learning from each one

exceeds my criteria for a successful workshop. This group was great. What I will remember most is not the heat, but rather the results. Having a great time, learning more than would fit in the boat, and getting stellar photos of wildlife made the trip for me.

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Queenie
and the Mattress Monster

By Louise Fusfeld

Queenie was born a wild mustang out on the Great Plains who had been tamed and then served her whole life pulling plows and hauling wagons. Now was her time to lie in a lush, green meadow, warming her arthritic joints in the sun.

She had been an employee of my mother's family. One day, Mom had asked Harv and Leroy, two of my mother's brothers, to take an old, flattened mattress out to the barn and to fill it with fresh straw. This they duly did, and on the

way back from the barn decided to take a short cut through Queenie's home pasture.

The two boys each carried one end of the heavy mattress, which sagged in the middle, sort of like Queenie's back. It was hard going, so they had the ingenious idea of getting underneath the mattress and carrying it on top of their backs. This worked swimmingly, and they trundled along at a good clip right through Queenie's front yard.

At that moment, our elderly equine was lying in the fresh spring grass catching some rays and munching on a dandelion. She was daydreaming about her ration of oats being brought to her in warmed milk, garnished with carrots, sliced apples and sugar lumps. Then Seabiscuit would show up at her stall door, nervously clutching a bouquet of pansies in his teeth.

Suddenly her awareness was jerked back to the pasture by an unidentified walking object. Queenie's eyesight was not what it used to be, but she knew what belonged in her field and what didn't. Bees and bunny rabbits belonged, giant rectangular walking blobs didn't.

The walking blob came closer. It bounced a little at the edges, definitely a threatening gesture. Queenie initially used the freeze-and-pray method of predator avoidance, as it required the least amount of energy. But still it ap-

proached and as it came nearer gave its war cry, a sound strangely similar to children's laughter. This was it. If she didn't make a move now, she'd be ripped limb from limb by the hideous beast.

Although she was a senior animal, she was a scared one. She sprang to her feet, gave a shrill whinny of warning and bolted across the grass. The blob monster paused as she galloped by, and the body appeared to split off from the legs.

"What kind of mutated perversion could it be?" Queenie thought. But, she didn't stop to find out . She kept running at full tilt and on reaching the fence she sailed over it, like a gazelle chased by lions.

With the fence between her and the pastureland nightmare, she felt secure enough to pause and look back. Through her cataract fog, she saw Harv and Leroy laughing uncontrollably and a large rectangular corpse lying beside them in the grass. They must have slain her attacker and were laughing with joy.

Queenie's sides heaved as she struggled to recover her breath and her dignity. Then a smile curled on her panting lips as she realized there still was some wild mustang in the old girl yet.

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Galveston Ferry Tale

By Sheryl L. Nelms

passengers
were tossing

Cheetos up
to the trailing gulls

ten-year-old David
had nothing
to offer

except

a small wad
of Kleenex

that he threw
into the air

then watched
in horror

as the lead bird
caught it

and neck
extended

accordioned
it down

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PIDGE

By Lee Kirk

Pidge thought he was a chicken. He wasn't retarded or anything. It was a simple case of "identity crisis."

He'd fallen into the chicken yard one day on what must have been his first attempted flight. Frantic chicken-cries of "Hawk! Hawk!" had brought me running, only to discover that the "threat" was a baby wild pigeon, so young that the feathers had not yet developed over its beak.

The poor little creature was paralyzed with fright, but although the old Buff Orpington rooster had roughed him up a bit, he didn't seem to be badly injured.

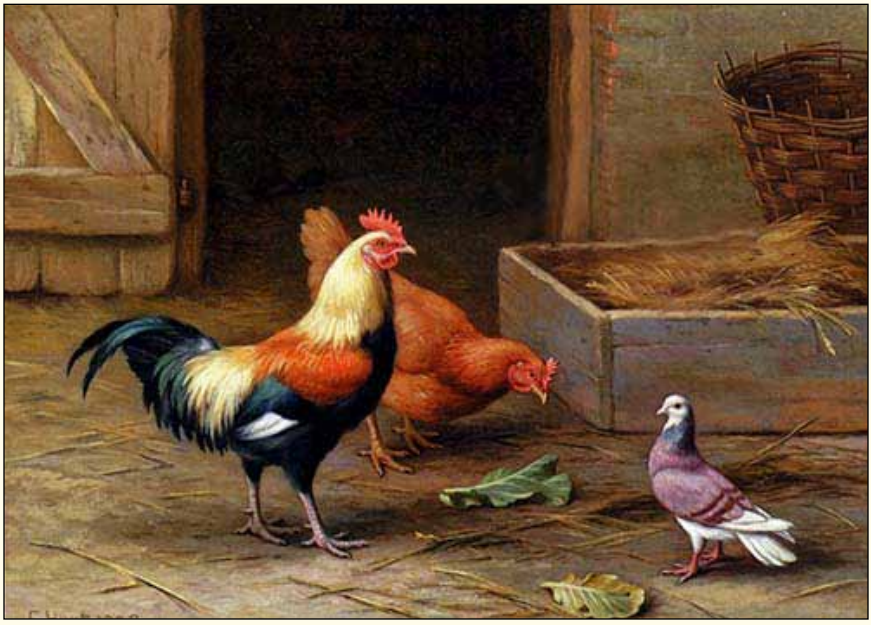
A few days' recuperation in the sanctuary of an old gerbil cage, and the little guy was recovered enough to be set free. Furtively, I tucked him up on the carport roof where

the homing pigeon that had adopted us the previous summer was strutting around. I figured the homer could take the baby under its wing, so to speak, and teach it what a pigeon should know.

The homer took one look, puffed himself up in disbelief, and flew away. Forever. We never saw beak nor feather of him again. It was the worst case of pigeon pique I'd ever seen.

I figured the wild baby would probably fly off too, to seek his own kind.

Not so. I doubt that he knew what his own kind was.



From his vantage point on the roof, he peered into the poultry yard. The chickens were the handiest bird-like creatures around, so Pidge joined them.

The chickens were not thrilled. However, within a few weeks Pidge was able to make a place for himself.

It wasn't a very significant place to be sure. He could eat at the feeders as long as no hen was there to reprimand him with a peck on the back. He took to roosting with the chickens at night although he was definitely at the bottom of the pecking order. Sleek roosters and fat, self-satisfied hens snoozed together on the elite side of the roost while Pidge huddled alone at the end of a line of lesser pullets.

Pigeon instinct, however, prevented Pidge's complete acceptance. It is customary among pigeons for the males and females to share nesting shores. The male will take over during the middle of the day, sitting on the eggs so the female can rest, eat, bathe and preen. Pidge, finding himself in an egg-filled environment, was simply responding to this instinct when he tried to invade the nests on which the hens were sitting.

The hens did not take kindly to this offer of assistance. They'd fish Pidge out from beneath their warm bodies, grab him by his neck feathers, give him a good shake and dump him on the floor. Pidge became disastrously de-plumed.

We had the only naked-necked pigeon in the neighborhood.

This went on for several years. During the winter, Pidge would regain his handsome, purple-sheened neck feathers; each spring he'd get plucked again.

Something had to be done. I finally acquired a pretty little female pigeon from a pigeon breeder. We named her Paloma. An old breeding pen was hastily converted into a pigeon loft for her and, a few days later, Pidge entered the loft to meet his new mate.

Paloma was demure, feminine, coquettish. She ducked her head and peered shyly at Pidge.

Poor Pidge. Uncouth, uncultured, inexperienced in the ways of pigeon courtship, he took one look — seemed to shout "WOMAN" in caveman tones — and leapt at her lustily. Paloma dealt him such a whack with her wing that he rolled across the loft, beak over tail feathers. Undiscouraged, he tried again. Again he found

himself, dizzy and perplexed, on the opposite side of the loft. By the second day he hunkered on the end of the perch, looking more confused and miserable than he ever had among the intolerant chickens. Perhaps, I thought, the poor little guy was already too imprinted by his life as a chicken to become a pigeon again.

But somehow, Paloma got through to him, and Pidge revised his approach. Now he stomped out a pigeon courtship dance, displaying his wing and circling his intended, proclaiming his masculine appeal. He billed and cooed and wooed. And won. Soon there was nest-building activity in the loft.

I lined the nesting boxes with pine needles and tossed some straw and sticks onto the floor of the loft.

Paloma was choosey about what went into the nest. She fussed in the box, arranging and rearranging the few wisps of straw and tiny sticks she'd carried there. Pidge, determined to prove himself, fell in love with one particular over-large stick. He'd struggle for half an hour to wrestle it from the ground up to the nest box on the wall. Paloma would accept it graciously, wait until Pidge's back was turned and chuck it out of the box again.

Pidge never caught on. That stick went in and out of the box at least a dozen times.

Then came the day a small round egg appeared in the nest. And, a day or so later, another.

Oh Pidge! Was ever a bird so pleased, so proud, so fulfilled? At last — nice little warm eggs he could sit on. At last, a gentle and kindhearted companion who appreciated his efforts. He glowed. He swelled. He threatened to rise right up into the air with his pleasure. Could there possibly be more?

Indeed. When the babies emerged from the eggs Pidge stuffed their demanding craws until they seemed to double in size each day. And in the midst of all this, more wonder. Paloma laid another pair of eggs in a second nest.

I admired the pigeons' dedication to their offspring. The little squabs were naked and pink, their feet huge and their vulture-like beaks always open and demanding, something only a mother — or a father — could love, I thought.

Can there be such a thing as too much joy? Perhaps, perhaps.

Half a dozen times a day I'd stop by the loft to observe the progress of the family. One day, during Paloma's time away from the nest, I noticed that she seemed "off." Nothing specific, just a difference in the way she carried herself. I put antibiotics in the water and watched her frequently the rest of the day.

The following morning, the loft was the first visit on my list of chores. I wasn't prepared for what I found. Paloma lay on the floor, cold and stiff. The larger of the two squabs also sprawled lifelessly, its head hanging over the side of the nest box.

Pidge crouched disconsolately near Paloma. He shuffled his feet and looked at me questioningly, but I had no answers.

I took away the bodies and the unset eggs, replaced the feeder and waterer with sterilized equipment, and added more antibiotic.

"I'm sorry," I told Pidge. "It's the best I can do. The rest is up to you."

I really didn't think the last little squab would survive. Even if he didn't succumb to the respiratory disease that and taken the others, I doubted that Pidge could brood and nurture the baby by himself.

But he did. The great joy was gone from him, but he steadfastly performed the duties of father and mother. Soon the little bird developed feathers. He was the image of his wild father, blue-barred and elegant.

As soon as the youngster was old enough to fly, I opened the loft during the day. Pidge now took to the sky as he never had before. Pidge and son flying their graceful cir-

cles above us through that summer, fall and winter became as much a part of the farm as the animals that browsed the pastures below.

The following spring there came an evening when I went to close the loft and found that there were no pigeons in it. Instead, I found a trail of blue and gray feathers that led across the poultry yard to the old apple tree where the raccoons hung out, watching for mislaid eggs.

Nature is not sentimental. I couldn't blame the raccoons for adding pigeon to their menu. It was harder not to blame myself for carelessness.

Pidge is gone, but he left me with one lesson. Having watched that meek and terrified little wild creature adapt and overcome; having seen him experience ardor and tenderness, steadfastness and joy; having been there when he grieved and when he loved, I perceived that we all are equal in nature.

"All creatures great and small," there is no least one among us.

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Waiting For Me

By David Griffin

Clocks intrigue me. I have five or six hanging on the walls of my little cave where I write and ponder the universe. None of them keep the same time. My favorites don't even work. There's something about a stopped clock that means more to me than anything as mundane as the correct time. At this stage of my life I don't need to be reminded of time passing as much as I need encouragement. That may have always been true.

I brought a clock home from a flea market last month and centered it in the middle of my desk where it did absolutely nothing but sit there glowing in the pride of its century old craftsmanship, a 12-inch-high pendulum clock with a white face of Roman Numerals behind a glass door. I didn't wind it, but let it sit silent. It brought back memories of my father, who once rebuilt a similar old clock.

After a few days, I opened the little door on the front,

wound the mechanism, set the hands to the correct time and gave the pendulum a tiny shove. The clock went tick, tock. In a few moments, I reached in and stopped the pendulum. I closed the little door, leaving the clock silent, and sat there thinking about the man who had provided me with so many lessons, some unwittingly. More importantly, he had been present, in the best sense of the word.

The clock Dad rebuilt when I was in high school ticked louder than most as it sat on the mantel in our living room. In the small flat, my brother and I were annoyed by the ticking at night and would get up after everyone went to bed and silence the clock. Dad restarted it each morning without comment. As I turned from the mantel one night after stopping the pendulum, I saw my father sitting in the dark in his easy chair.

"It was keeping us awake," I said.

"It's not very loud," Dad said.

"I can start it again," I said, without much enthusiasm.

"Never mind," he said, "leave it stopped. It's a nice piece to look at, but we've got other clocks to tell us the time."

"OK," I said. Wanting to leave before he changed his mind, I said, "Gotta go. I have a geometry test in the morning."

"You'll do well," he said.

"I'm not very good at math," I replied

"I mean you'll do well in life," he said.

I've always remembered that exchange. I wonder if my father realized how much I valued his encouragement. It was so much more helpful to me in those days than a lecture about buckling down and keeping my nose to the grindstone.

Dad let the clock on the mantel stay stopped. The hands said 11:34 for the next twenty years. Our little family joke whenever anyone asked the time was to answer, "eleven thirty-four." When the mortician was ready to dress Dad's body before his wake, he asked for his jewelry. I handed him my father's old watch after setting it to 11:34.

Perhaps a stopped clock serves our real needs better than a working clock. A clock in motion is a taskmaster. It sets the pace and counts the hours. A stopped clock has wisdom. It does nothing but wait.

I'd like the clock sitting on my desk to be like the one on our mantel during my teenage years: silent and wise, its pendulum stilled from constantly swinging left and right like an ego's incessant hunt to find its own selfish purpose.

My father's clock didn't count the time and it didn't pester me with the lateness of the hour. It didn't note my wasted days while I sought the purpose of my life. When I

wasted time and at first refused to accept my burdens and my gifts, it allowed me to cope with life at the speed of my own heartbeat.

It waited for me like an old friend or a mentor, like my father, who stood back armed only with hope as I searched out my own paths.

My father and I walked different routes on our journeys through life. He knew that would be the case. So, he seldom offered advice while I hammered out my plans and lived my own life. He trusted I would find my way. I have indeed, but I sometimes hear his gentle laugh from farther up the path as he waits for me to catch up.

Scouting out the best chicken-fried steak in West Texas

By Clarence Wolfshohl

To all the junior high coaches and scouts in Texas and to my cardiologist

Pre-Game Warm-up

Nearing midnight. Mid-October. A few miles east of Eldorado, headlights pointing toward Menard. Radio scratches from faint station to fainter. The harvest moon rises enormously orange. Telephone poles and fence posts on the flat horizon backlit into a polygraph printout as my partner and I cruise back down to the Hill Country.

Finally, Dub hits a clear station with his dial fidgeting.

"Maybe now we'll get some scores." We'd been searching for high school football scores since about twenty miles this side of Big Lake. We'd got a few preachers and a good sampling of country western, but if those stations ever broadcast Friday night scores, they had faded away before they got to us. Now we have something. Something that begins to sound like a game rather than the scores, and it is. Coffeyville Golden Tornados once again.

For several weeks this season on our returns from nearly any spot west of Menard, we have finally after desperate searches up and down the dial tuned into the Coffeyville, Kansas, high school football games. Either the team played later than Texas high schools or the broadcast was delayed

so that Coffeyvillites could relive their glory or humiliation as soon as they got home after a post game burger or while they were parked on Coffeyville's Lover Lane, reviewing pass and punt strategies. Or perhaps it just took that long for the signal to wend its way down from southeast Kansas, across the Oklahoma border, through Tulsa, Oklahoma City, wade the Red River and glide through Wichita Falls, Abilene, and San Angelo into that vastness beyond.

However it got to us with midnight approaching through our windshield, we got to know the Coffeyville Golden Tornados. Knew junior quarterback Johnny Wilson liked to roll out right rather than drop back, and his favorite receiver was little, 5'6"sophomore Spunk Foster. And in those short yardage situations when they had to gut it up, LaVonne Richmond, all six-foot, 230 pounds of him, would take the ball inside tackle on a dive or quick trap. But evidently Emporia, Wichita Southeast and right now Pittsburg had senior quarterbacks who could rollout right and left and dropback, spunkier little wide receivers and bigger, faster LaVonnes because Coffeyvillites weren't enjoying the broadcast. Dub and I guessed what play they'd run next and speculated how they would block it or what routes the other receivers beside Spunk would run.

We couldn't stop what we had been doing for a concen-

trated forty-eight minutes earlier that night. Drawing X's and O's, if only on air. We were scouts. Every autumn Friday when coaches and team, faculty and staff, townspeople and well wishers met at the football field or traveled over to Llano or Sonora, up to Brady or Wall, or down to Comfort or Fredericksburg, Dub and I packed our pencils and clipboards and left town.

I spent the 1970s wandering over Texas as a high school football scout. And searching for the best chicken-fried steak in West Texas. For just like armies, scouts travel on their stomachs. (And some travel on fairly hefty ones). We were always on the lookout for the best cafes in towns that may not have but one or two. And if we weren't sure of the house specialty, in West Texas we always knew we couldn't go too far amiss with chicken-fried steak.

So, as we traveled east on US 190, I visualized Johnny Wilson getting sacked again, looked into the moon nearly too large to disentangle itself from the electric lines and chewed another Rolaid.

Kickoff

Before I continue, I need to prepare the way. Like a kicker getting ready for the opening kickoff, I must go through

some rituals of preparation. Turning the ball over in my hands and squeezing it from the ends as if that was going to make the ball rounder.1

[Here I feel the need to throw in a footnote. It's not important enough to include in the paragraph, but it may help explain the joke. I know having to explain a joke means the joke is not very good, but this needs some elaboration. The shape of the football makes it difficult to placekick. It's great for punting those high spiraling floaters, but a rounder ball would be more amenable for kicking off a tee or ground with someone holding it upright with his fingertips. Or, as in the old days, dropkicking. But the contemporary shape of the football makes dropkicking nearly impossible and kicking off a tee a specialized skill. Notice the dominance of soccer style kicking in the past quarter century. No one kicks them like old Lou Groza used to. But anyway, the idea of the average 170-pound kicker, whose only real claim to being a football player is his foot, squeezing the ball round is absurd. I don't want to get technical in this essay; that's why I thought I'd put this in a footnote. Maybe I shouldn't.]

I was saying, squeezing the ball and then placing it delicately on the tee so the wind does not topple it. The

kicker goes through such rituals, even stooping to pick a few blades of grass and to release them to tell which way the wind is blowing — all setting up the moment for the kickoff. So, it would be good now to prepare the way by explaining the practice of scouting.

Scouting is the system whereby high school coaches gather information about upcoming opponents and school districts get the most hours of labor from their faculty for the least amount of extra pay. The way it works in most small towns in Texas — or did work in the 1970s — is as follows. A teacher whose subject is, say, math or history or even English, realizes his income falls short of his outgo and wants to supplement his contractual minimum pay scale. He is a male in Texas; he must know something about football. So, he is offered a coaching position: junior high eighth grade. Working with these novices to the game could be fun, mold character, shape a generation and it wouldn't take much time because junior highs usually play on Thursdays. Practices on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and then play on Thursday. So, he accepts the extra $200 a year on his contract and thinks of himself as eighth-grade football coach.

Then he is told that he is part of the Coaching Staff and will need to start work in early August by getting ready for

the high school team's two-a-day practices before classes start. He begins learning the System of the Coaching Staff, the formations and plays, the terminology, the ambience of the locker room. Then, the hammer is lowered: a little more time is required. Friday nights he is to travel to ever-farther away games to scout the upcoming opponents, and Saturday all day he must deliver his scouting report and help the Coaching Staff prepare for next week's game. But he gets more than the $200. For on scouting trips he gets mileage and Friday supper (receipts needed), and on Saturday he gets a burger and tater tots for lunch.

In the early 1970s I began scouting for Mason High School and questing after the best chicken-fried steak in West Texas. Not at the same time, the quest for the chicken-fried steak began later. There was a period of apprenticeship when I had to learn my craft before I thought seriously about food. At first, any food would do.

The first assignment that my partner Jimmy Lange and I had was scouting Llano 's scrimmage in Georgetown. Jimmy was the first of several seventh-grade football coaches and scouting partners over my career. He was a Mason hometown boy who had just graduated from Tarleton State and taught math. Neither one of us had ever scouted before, but we had some vague idea of what was wanted.

More firmly in mind was what to eat. So, on the way to the scrimmage, we picked up some barbecue from Coopers and a six-pack of Pearl in Llano and drove east. I could tell you about that barbecue or even those beers, but everyone knows them by reputation if not by experience.

I will tell you about our initiation into scouting. Scouting is the act of transcribing the seemingly chaotic movement on the football field into a precise language of X's and O's.2

[Here again I feel compelled to insert a footnote to explain the technicalities of football theory. A football play is charted or mapped by indicating the formation of the offensive team — those with the ball — with eleven O's and the arrangement of the defensive team with an equal number of X's. Some practitioners use V's instead of X's, perhaps because they perceive less bulky players. Lines of motion are then drawn indicating the routes and actions of the various players. For example, the quarterback, after receiving the ball from the center, may turn his back to the opposing team and hand the ball to either one of his backs going to the right or to one going left. The motions, of course, are meant to confuse the opposition and can be quite intricate. No more technicalities, I promise.]

Certain motions are designated by the terminology of the game. So, Jimmy and I had studied to learn the current glossary of the Mason High School Coaching Staff System during those two weeks before we were sent on our first assignment. Of course, football — as many people have clichéd — is not rocket science. I figured, if I could do a prosodic scan of any Shakespearean sonnet and a critical analysis of the metaphorical language in Wordsworth's "spots of time" passages in "The Prelude," I could figure out football strategy. And Jimmy taught math. So, I thought he would do better than I counting how many players were on the line and how many in the backfield.

We had spent about ten or fifteen minutes glaring at the field through binoculars and filling out our purple-stenciled scouting forms with the O's and X's and lines of motion. I was the offensive specialist this night, charting the plays, while Jimmy noted the defensive formations. His secondary duty was to watch the routes taken by Llano's receivers on any passing plays. It is hard for one person to have his eyes on all the action at once although after some practice we would be sent off as lone scouts. As I said, about ten or fifteen minutes into the action, Llano finally threw a pass. I saw and charted the quarterback's short drop back,

the fullback's feint through the middle and the tailback's flare to the right as a safety valve, and I knew the ball finally ended up with the tight-end ten yards down the field. But I had not seen his line of motion. I jumped to the conclusion that he had run what is called a buttonhook, and I asked Jimmy, "Did he run a buttonhook?"

"What's a buttonhook?"

While the Llano team huddled to call its next play, I explained the buttonhook and several other pass routes to Jimmy, for which he was very grateful. He had played tackle at Mason a number of years before. Llano ran several other plays for the next five or six minutes and then went back to the successful pass. As I entered the down and yardage, position on the field, and other pertinent information for the repeat charting of this play, Jimmy beamed at me and proclaimed, "He ran a buttonhole!" Jimmy taught fractions very well.

First and Ten–Tackle Trap

The first chicken-fried steak that first season was average. I can't remember the name of the restaurant —City Café, Hiway 67 Diner or the Cactus — I forget. But it was in Ballinger where we had gone to scout Sonora, Mason's

archrivals at the time. Along with our chicken-fried steak we were served disillusionment about scouting.

Jimmy and I had been reared on Westerns and war movies, and our notion of scouting had been defined by those films. Scouts were always those who walked silently through the woods, hid among rocks along the mesa's rim to count how many Apaches were gathered, passed like ghosts, reading footprints but leaving none of their own. If not spies, they were somewhat incognito. In Westerns, they often wore buckskin instead of the cavalry blue. So, both of us tried to enter and exit these enemy camps unnoticed.

Our coaching garb, which we wore for our junior high practices and games Monday through Thursday, was supplied by the Mason High Athletic Department and, of course, was in the school color: purple. Add another $25 to our salaries. Those were the flamboyant '70s–big collars, leisure suits with white belts and shoes and bright colors, but we lived in Mason. So, when we set off on Friday afternoons, we wore what we had worn in class that day. Boots, jeans, and oxford shirts. We could pass for native in any restaurant west of St. Louis. Not that we ever discussed our subterfuge in cunning tones, but we did leave our clipboards in the pick-up when we stopped to eat. At some level, each

decided on his own to be invisible as the wind.

At that restaurant in Ballinger we sat in a corner booth and softly discussed our junior high games of the previous night, the good plays and bad plays and the hilarious actions that only junior high kids are capable of on the football field. Our meals finished, we gathered our check and strolled toward the cash register. A couple of old guys, dressed as we were except for snap-button shirts and stained Stetsons, looked up, nodded and one said, "You checking our boys out for next week?" Both of us halted, bewildered. Did we look like people from Mason? Do the people of Mason have a distinct presence?

"Who are your boys, sir?"

"Oh, we're from Sonora, up here to see them play Ballinger. You're from Mason, ain't you?"

I looked Jimmy in the eye, trying to see a Mason birthmark. Then I looked above his forehead. At the purple caps with the emblem of a rider on a bucking bronco — a Puncher — superimposed on a capital M.

Second and Eight–End Sweep

Not often, but a few times we had choices where to eat. Most of the teams we scouted were from small towns just like Mason, which had one restaurant (the Hilltop) and one fast-food drive-in (the Kreme Kup). Halfway through my tenure there, a Dairy Queen did move in. We especially liked to scout in Fredericksburg because we could get beer with our meals. As in Mason, many of the towns forbid on-premises drinking, an ordinance I never have understood considering all the beer consumed up and down the streets. You know, cruising the drag with an open container, still legal in the 1970s. So not only could we have a beer with supper, we could have schnitzel for supper. The second week of my first season of scouting we went to Fritztown, ate schnitzel with cold beer in frosted mugs, and got our receipts to turn into the superintendent's office for

reimbursement.

You remember how I said earlier that the previous week we had bought a six-pack of Pearl to have with our Cooper's barbecue. And you remember how I said that we got mileage for scouting. We had bought that six-pack at a filling station and instead of getting a receipt — we had thought of the beer as part of our meal allowance — we figured we'd get our dollar back in mileage. Thus, our first week's receipt was for only barbecue. Our superintendent may have hesitated over our individual receipts for a pound of barbecue, quart of potato salad, quart of beans, bread-onion-and-pickles for the taking, but he authorized our expense checks anyway. He didn't when he saw receipts for schnitzel and two beers each.

On Tuesday afternoon as our junior high gladiators suited up, Mr. Schultze visited Jimmy and me in our tiny office/equipment room with receipts in hand.

"You can't do this," were the first words he uttered.

We really hadn't paid attention to the slips of paper in his hand, looking him in the eye as innocent men will do. So, we looked at each other and then back at him in bewilderment.

"Sir?"

"You can't do this," he repeated, this time raising the re-

ceipts to eye-level and shaking his hand once or twice.

The schnitzel had been a bit higher than a chicken-fried steak, but we were not told there was a limit on the cost of our meals.

"It was Fritztown schnitzel," Jimmy ventured. "Better than my grandma's. And we didn't know there was a maximum."

"Not the schnitzel." Mr. Schultze's eyes narrowed.

"Not the schnitzel?" I echoed.

"No, not the schnitzel. The beer."

"Beer?" Jimmy and I harmonized and realized the office door was opened and a number of seventh grade boys in various stages of suiting up were immobile in audience to our conversation. He shut the door.

"You can't be reimbursed for beer. We're a school using taxpayer's money, and . . ."

"Most of them drink beer," Jimmy snickered.

"That's not the point." And then Mr. Schultze changed his tone and semantic approach. "The school district is not allowed to purchase alcoholic beverages. Certainly, most or

many of the people in Mason have nothing against beer. Well, the Baptist," he said and smiled, "but the district cannot be buying employees beer. You understand?"

He had a point, and Jimmy and I realized our salary had just been cut by a dollar or two for every scouting trip. We had no choice. "Yeah, we understand."

Mr. Schultze opened the door and started to leave, but turned and said, "The schnitzel was a bit expensive." Then he strode away through the eyes of forty curious junior high boys.

Third and Six–Rollout Pass

Back at one time, there was one steakhouse famous over all West Texas and even beyond. I first heard about Lowake's from my college roommate in Alpine. He had been there once and marveled about the airstrip for millionaire cattle and oilmen who flew in for the T-bones. I've never been there even though my wife and I made a pilgrimage just up the road once to Rowena, hometown of Bonnie Parker. Because we scouted all around the area — Ballinger, Winters, Bronte, Robert Lee — it seems we could have detoured at least one Friday night and treated ourselves to a Lowake's chicken-fried steak if not something more prime.

We didn't. The closest we got to such steakhouse celebrity was during my later years as a scout when my partner and I were assigned the Wall Hawks, Mason's district nemesis for a number of years in the late 70s.

I had a new partner by then. Dub Behrens was with me the last two years, his last two years of teaching before retirement. I don't know what lured him back from the luxury of being able to leave school at 3:45 p.m. Monday through Friday and not having to spend weekends in the locker room, but he spent his last two years creakily trying to demonstrate a four-point stance to twelve-year-olds and reminiscing to me on lonesome Texas highways Friday nights. For Dub had played football; he was another hometown boy and had played for Abilene Christian College during the Depression. He had coached, first as assistant at several Hill Country towns, then as head coach, ending with a short stint at Mason, where he settled back home finally as just a classroom teacher. He loved the game and was one of those coaches who could remember every play they had ever called in every game. And he liked to relive those games.

On that Wall scouting trip, we discussed our supper strategy and decided we could drive the extra few miles into San Angelo. Choices. And Dub wanted Zentner's

Daughter. For you non-West Texans, Dub wasn't desirous of female companionship; Zentner's Daughter was — is — one of the well-known restaurants west of US 281 in Texas. I was surprised at his choice because he usually ate gingerly. He had a cholesterol problem even back then before it was fashionable, and he had only recently subdued ulcers. But I think he was celebrating. The night before, his seventh-graders had won for the first time after five losses. But perhaps more to celebrate was that one of his combat stories had finally worked.

As I said, Dub could recall every play of every game he had ever been in as player or coach, plays and games that had covered about half the twentieth century. He had a library of stories he'd recount at appropriate times. Usually to blank expressions and little results. But Thursday night, his celebrated leather helmet story succeeded. The seventh-grade team had only fifteen players and the four extras were lineman or, in the seventh grade, unathletic boys who could not throw or even hold on to the ball. After getting tackled mercilessly for about the tenth time in a row, Dub's tailback crawled over to the sideline. He looked up into Dub's face with his lower lip trembling one moment from crying and a questioning glare in his eyes as if shouting "Why?" Dub put his hand on the boy's shoulder,

drew him close a second and then kneeled down and faced him.

"You gotta be tough, Timmy. Why when I was playing up at ACC, back in those days we didn't have plastic helmets. They were leather and thin leather, too. No face masks, either. We had to be tough. And we were. We even stopped wearing helmets. Took 'em off our heads and folded them up and stuffed 'em in our back pockets."

Tim's lip stopped trembling and a sardonic smile tiptoed on the edge of his eyes. Perhaps he took a step to being a man that night, perhaps there was no other choice or perhaps he just didn't want to hear any more of Dub's stories, but he returned to the game and in the dying minutes of the game scored the winning touchdown, as the Menard coach across the field knelt down talking with his tailback.

We had chicken-fried steaks at Zentner's Daughter, not the best in West Texas, but above average. Yes, Dub also taught math.

Fourth and Six–Punt

A few years ago on a visit to my sister north of San Antonio, I passed a billboard advertising a restaurant somewhere on Texas 46 between New Braunfels and Boerne.

The sign proclaimed in two-foot high lettering, "BEST CHICKEN-FRIED STEAK IN TEXAS," and under that in six-inch lettering, "19 served." I'm still flummoxed. Nineteen served? Is that per hour? Per day? Or is that totally past tense? And why? There were only nineteen judged the best, and now their successors are all less satisfying so that the chef retired? The restaurant closed after those nineteen, and the sign was just a tribute to culinary history? Or were the spices of the white gravy that some say really make the steak so rare and, therefore, costly, that the restaurant couldn't afford to make them anymore because they couldn't charge customers the steaks' actual value? Did competing restaurants send out enforcers to threaten pre-emptive action if the steaks were continued?

By the time I saw that billboard, I too had a cholesterol problem and eschewed red meat and rich gravies, not to mention the mandatory French fries. I should have gone back to get the location of the restaurant and investigated, but I had abandoned my quest years before, even before I became fashionable with my cholesterol count. I had quested for and discovered the BEST CHICKEN-FRIED STEAK IN WEST TEXAS if not all of Texas. But like Launcelot and the Holy Grail, it was a fleeting experience, a mere taste of the sumptuous and celestial possibilities.

Halfway through my first season as a scout, I discovered my calling to scout for the sangreal of West Texas cuisine. By then we were scouting only in small towns, with cafes that served only American food. Sometimes we were fortunate enough to come to town the night of the volunteer firemen's fish-fry, all the catfish you can eat for $4 plus drink. Soda now. Or if we got into town late, we had to eat at the concession stand at halftime — Comfort's German tacos (a wurst wrapped in a tortilla) weren't too bad. But we had settled into the chicken-fried steak routine. I can't

remember how I got my calling. It was not a blinding light and choral voices, or a sudden realization that if that was what I was going to eat anyway, I should try to find the best. It just evolved. By the last weeks of my third season, I was evangelical. And that is when I experienced the best chicken-fried steak I have ever had.

It was in San Saba. We had scouted San Saba early in the season, but they had played in Goldwaithe. Now, we were scouting Deleon who we would play for bi-district the next week. I had taken my basketball teams to tournaments in San Saba the last few years and knew where the Dairy Queen and the McDonalds were, but we had soon driven past them and through much of the town when we spotted a small café with room for about five cars in the parking lot. Game time approached, so we decided to look no further. It must have been fate. I can't describe, there is no language to describe that meal. Steak tender and breading moist, gravy smooth and snow-white, fries crisp and lettuce and tomato fresh. See, words do not suffice. We finished this last supper of the season with only ten minutes to spare before kickoff and left without getting toothpicks from the counter dispenser and nearly forgetting to ask for our receipts. We were carried through the first half of the game on just the after-taste.

I would have lingered longer if I had known the experience would be so fleeting. I would go on the next half-decade questing from Crane to Marlin, Center Point to Deleon like a disillusioned Sir Bors or Percival, having glimpsed once but never again the Holy Grail. I would finally abandon the search and convert to kung pao chicken and then return to the faith of the tamale, which my San Antonio rearing had instilled in me.

A few weeks after that third season was over, during the Christmas holidays, when my wife and I had a free evening at last, we traveled to San Saba for a meal out. I had told her about the incredible chicken-fried steak. Even our daughter, who was in her juvenile burger and fries stage, anticipated something special. When we passed the Golden Arches, she looked back wistfully in curiosity about how McFries tasted, but she knew gustatory paradise lay ahead. The sun was sliding down early on this December evening, and lights blinked on along the street. When we neared the spot, I saw no lights and then no cars in the parking lot. I coasted up to the door and read the scrawled sign: "GOOD EATIN'S OUT OF BUSINESS."

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